



This is an author produced version of a paper published in Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourses, Policy-Making and Outcomes for Migrants and their Families. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the published paper:

DeBono, Daniela. (2017). 'Burning without fire' in Sweden : The paradox of the state's attempt to safeguard deportees' psychosocial wellbeing. Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourses, Policy-Making and Outcomes for Migrants and their Families, p. null

URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2043/22446>

Publisher: Routledge

This document has been downloaded from MUEP (<https://muep.mah.se>) / DIVA (<https://mau.diva-portal.org>).

# **‘Burning without fire’ in Sweden: the paradox of the state’s attempt to safeguard deportees’ psychosocial wellbeing**

Daniela DeBono

Citable as DeBono, D. (2017) “‘Burning without fire’ in Sweden: the paradox of the state’s attempt to safeguard deportees’ psychosocial wellbeing”. In Vathi, Z. & King, R. (eds) *Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourses, Policy-Making and Outcomes for Migrants and their Families*. London: Routledge. 129-148.

## **Introduction**

This chapter critically analyses the official discourse of protection of migrants’ psychosocial wellbeing by drawing on first-hand experiences of migrants who are living through the forced return migration process in Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Forced migrants resist their return decision in various ways. For the authorities, they have become ‘police cases’; therefore people who need to be removed from the territory by force. Sweden is a developed welfare state which has earned an international reputation as a country where human rights are respected (Grimheden 2006). It also fares well with respect to migrants’ rights and entitlements in both the legal and welfare systems (MIPEX 2014). However, little is known about the psychosocial wellbeing of migrants’

---

<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges the work of Karin Magnusson and Sofia Rönqvist, collaborators in the original project (DeBono et al. 2015). Furthermore, I thank Rachael Scicluna, Zana Vathi and Russell King for feedback on draft versions.

who are living with the imminent risk of deportation and how they, themselves, perceive and are influenced it.

The start of the deportation process is when a person who has been given a ‘decision to leave’ refuses to comply or to collaborate with the Swedish Migration Agency. At this point the case is handed over to the Police with the understanding that some element of force might be needed to implement the return decision. Forced returnees can be asylum-seekers whose applications are turned down, or people who for various reasons lost their permit to stay, or never obtained one. They are all people whose dreams of establishing themselves in Sweden have been rendered grim. More critically, they are people coming to terms with the prospect that they may be returned to their official country of origin or to a third country. For asylum-seekers, it is often the same country they fled and spent years building a case to not be returned; or, if they have spent their lives in another country, it is a country they do not know. For migrants, this period in their lives is imbued with fear, uncertainty and an ebbing, but still present, hope that their situation might change.

In spite of their irregular status, the Swedish state has an obligation to ensure that the basic human rights of these migrants are safeguarded. In the area of returns this obligation is reflected in law. The European Return Directive, transposed into the Swedish Aliens Act in 2012, puts an obligation on EU member-states to ensure that all returns, including forced returns and detention, are conducted in accordance with ‘fundamental human rights’ and in a ‘humane and dignified’ manner.<sup>2</sup> This chapter deals with human rights in a broad manner, looking at the underlying principles rather than the specific human rights laws. Notwithstanding, since my focus is primarily on psychosocial wellbeing, it is good to keep in mind the fundamental rights to life and health found in all the major human rights treaties.

---

<sup>2</sup> Return Directive 2009, Preamble and Article 8(4).

From the point of view of psychosocial wellbeing, there are two characteristics of Sweden's international image that condition migrants' experiences of living as deportables. The first is derived from the excellent reputation that Sweden has built as a country where humanitarian activity is valued together with human and children's rights. What emerges from observation in the field is that this reputation is accompanied by high expectations of sympathy and compassion. Following this, is an appreciation of the highly regulated and non-corrupt Swedish migration and asylum system, fuelling further expectations of fairness, justice and non-discrimination. Reminiscent of Graeber's ideas on the 'utopia of rules', Sweden offers the utopian promise of fairness brought about by an impersonal, impartial bureaucracy, as opposed to structures built on family connections, patrimonial power and wealth, which are seen to lend themselves to nepotism and corruption (Graeber 2015). But the transparent bureaucracy 'bites back' when its rules are broken, with the threat, or actual exercise of force. Indeed when migrants receive the return decision, the disappointment is accentuated by both raised expectations and the harsh reality of sanctions should they fail to obey the rules. These are contradictions which the system is 'blind' to, but which emerge powerfully from the 'everyday' narratives shared by the migrants. The shadow that is cast on their wellbeing is penetratingly dark. This is powerfully and vividly encapsulated in this quote:

Most of the immigrants are coming here because they want to live in paradise, but which kind of paradise is this which is burning you without fire yeah. You're burning without fire in Sweden (Kader, Afghanistan, 21, male).

Migrants at risk of deportation live a life of exclusion. The degrees of exclusion vary according to the situation and status of the migrant. Being deportable in Sweden is characterised by dependency on the system, powerlessness to change, an inability to plan for the future, and overall, the fear of being sent back to the country of origin. The gravity of the impact of the return decision, which, in the absence of collaboration, can be executed by force, is conditioned

by several factors. The feelings of rejection, exclusion and fear of being returned are not new to a deportee. For many there is a gradual increase of these sentiments brought about by the sequence of unsuccessful applications for asylum, and ensuing civil and judicial appeals. These feelings are confirmed on a daily basis with the severe limitations on their life and the 'limbo' state that they find themselves in. Participation in community activities is curtailed: their living conditions can make this better or worse, as does their legal status. If they are in hiding their activities are further limited, and finally, detention is the crowning stage of exclusion. The return decision - 'the negative' – starts a downward spiral which has a grave impact on their wellbeing:

I have gotten psychological problems after they give me the negative. My situation has become worse day by day (Ismat, Afghanistan, 29, male).

This chapter approaches this discussion through the migrants' own subjective experiences of the deportation process, with a focus on aspects of their psychosocial wellbeing and health. It contributes to the few publications and studies on detention and deportation in Sweden, most recently by DeBono et al. (2015), Khosravi (2009), Puthooppambil et al. (2015) and Sager (2011). It is also an attempt to contribute to the broader discussion of what could constitute 'humane and dignified' treatment in the deportation process. This is done by producing knowledge through original empirical material of how migrants' subjectively experience the deportation process, and in particular how they present issues pertaining to their own psychosocial wellbeing.

My analysis of these experiences yields some clear patterns and trends. The ethnographic research for this paper, conducted during 2014 and 2015, includes 26 in-depth interviews of duration 1-5 hours with migrants of different ages, genders and nationalities, most of whom were living in Sweden and were deportable. Standard procedures of interviewing

vulnerable people were adhered to during the in-depth interviews: the interviewers explained the nature of the research, that there could be no direct benefit to their case, that they could stop the interview at any point, and care was taken to ensure that only the issues brought up by the migrants themselves were discussed.<sup>3</sup> Most migrants indulged in long conversations during the interviews often sharing information which went beyond the scope of the interview. This indicates that the interview was not perceived as part of the system, as official or as intruding. Other interviews were held with state officials in order to contextualise the data.

### **Psychosocial wellbeing and its consonance with human rights**

In recent years, in a clear move away from the medical model where wellbeing had been reduced to the medicalised definitions of psychological states, the term psychosocial wellbeing is used to refer to the close connection between psychological aspects of human experience and the wider social experience. Various migration bodies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refer to the importance of migrants' psychosocial health and wellbeing and have built development programmes and services around this concept, and the understanding that both psychological and social aspects are necessary to migrants' wellbeing (IOM 2013).

The concept of psychosocial wellbeing denotes a comprehensive person-centred approach to mental wellbeing which values social interactions, networks and connectedness. It follows that psychosocial wellbeing is culturally specific. Factors that can nurture psychosocial wellbeing include agency, autonomy and control; participation and involvement; social relationships and networks; and personal and community safety (Caplan 2002; Correa-Velez et al. 2010; Egan et al. 2008; Kohli and Mather 2003; Martikainen et al. 2002).

---

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter to protect the interviewees identities. For more detail on the project and its methodology see DeBono et al. (2015).

Psychosocial wellbeing and access to quality mental health care are recognised by the UN and human rights organisations as a key requirement of human rights and social justice (UN 2011). The World Health Organisation (WHO) includes mental health as a crucial factor in overall health (WHO 2010). The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (2014: 1-2), in a statement presented to the international community in 2014, recommends that governments and all stakeholders:

- include psychosocial well-being as a contributor and an outcome of sustainable development;
- make quality mental health care accessible to all sectors of society, as a requirement of human rights and social justice;
- implement the Social Protection Floor Initiative, including access to mental health care within primary health care, taking care of basic human needs of all vulnerable groups;
- provide mental health counsellors and social workers, trained in culturally specific methodology and techniques, to train and work with local communities in recognising mental health problems;
- ensure that all services are implemented according to ethical principles that affirm the dignity of everyone.

The relationship between psychosocial health and human rights, increasingly presented as self-evident by international organisations, has however been critically assessed. Grove et al. (2006) claim that this relationship does not have deep roots and is superficial and incidental; at best they are 'fair weather friends'. They trace the convergence of the two to a period when health professionals and psychologists had been exploring human rights dimensions to their work. The emergence of this relationship became apparent with the tsunami of 26 December 2004, which affected 12 countries, eight of which experienced significant tragedy (Grove et al. 2006).

In spite of this theoretical critique, the concept of psychosocial wellbeing serves as a good theoretical concept to analyse migrants' subjective experiences of the deportation system. It is an approach that allows us to deal with the difficult question of whether the impact on migrants' wellbeing is proportionate to the state's obligations to managing migration and its borders. It also allows us to look at these issues intersectionally where migration, human rights and considerations of psychosocial wellbeing meet rather than be treated as isolated matters. Ultimately, it helps to answer the critical question: is the proclaimed protection of migrants' psychosocial wellbeing by the state a paradox in the deportation process?

## **The Swedish Returns System**

Sweden has developed broad immigration and asylum policies, which have been refined over the years. The first deportation act was passed in 1914 whereas the first comprehensive immigration act was enacted in 1927. Significant reforms were introduced in the 1960s Aliens Act and in 2012 amendments were made in order to complete the transposition of the European Return Directive. All aspects of immigration are administered by an autonomous agency called the Swedish Migration Agency set up to ensure consistency and coherency in the migration policy. The vision of the Migration Agency is 'Sweden – a nation open for the possibilities of global migration'. On their official website this is explained thus: 'At the Migration Agency we see migration as a positive force, something that contributes to making our country richer, both financially and culturally' (Swedish Migration Agency 2015). The government's goal for the Swedish Migration Agency is:

The goal is to ensure a long-term, sustainable migration policy that safeguards asylum rights and, within the framework of regulated immigration, facilitates mobility across borders and promotes a needs-driven labour immigration, while utilising and

considering the development effects of migration, and furthering European and international cooperation (Swedish Migration Agency 2015).

Asylum, one can note, is placed at the very top of the agenda, and as a result the asylum system is sophisticated and highly regulated. It is difficult to say whether the Swedish asylum system, or any other asylum system for that matter, has achieved the necessary standards of justice and fairness. However the Swedish system, in the words of the Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘ensures respect for due process requirements and provides for a fair hearing and proper appeal procedures’ (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2007: III (24). Returns, both ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ as defined in bureaucratic terms, are also the responsibility of the Migration Agency. The Migration Agency endorses a policy of encouraging voluntary returns. The ratio of voluntary returns to forced returns is high, reaching 76:24 in 2014 (these figures also include Dublin returnees). As other research has shown, the terminology does not really do justice in this case – ‘voluntary’ means cooperation with the authorities and is often still imbued with unwillingness to return from the migrants’ perspective. This is the official language of the state: harsh, bureaucratic and divorced from the migrants’ experiences. And this is how Graeber’s conceptualisation of ‘structural violence’ can transform into physical harm:

forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm invariably tend to create the kinds of willful blindness we normally associate with bureaucratic procedures (Graeber 2006: 112).

Hence, structural violence can quickly translate into physical violence when returnees transgress, or speak out against the official rules: suffice to mention police, security officers and different sanctions imposed by the state. The physical and spatial displacement from one

country to another, one culture to another, one community to another, is violence of the most existential kind.

The Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for managing the five migrant detention centres (*förvar*) in the country, which operate primarily as pre-removal centres. In the implementation of forced returns, the Police is entrusted with cases where migrants have resisted the decision or absconded. Transportation is administered by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (*Kriminalvården*). Sweden, most notably, has refrained from outsourcing the transportation or running of detention centres to multinational profit-making companies, which can have calamitous, even lethal, effects on the migrants (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013).

A human rights' critique of the Swedish migration, asylum and deportation system is hardly yet expansive. It generally deals with the tightening of structural or policy issues, and the administrative slackening of standards (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2007). The authorities tend to respond and address issues within a few years. The internal human rights critique is more vigorous, focusing on the conditions in detention (Swedish Red Cross, *Förvar under lupp*) and the respect of the *non-refoulement* principle.

### **What 'burning without fire' means: living as deportables in Sweden**

The return process, fraught with anxiety as it is, can become overwhelming for migrants who resist the decision. This section explores the overarching fear of return frequently reiterated by irregular migrants themselves. Migrants at risk of deportation may be living in the Swedish Migration Agency's accommodation; or in the community with their whereabouts known to the authorities; they may have absconded and live in hiding; or they may be in detention. Some issues are common irrespective of their situation: for example, migrants mention mental health problems such as insomnia, paranoia, anxiety, physical manifestations of distress and a general

sense of weariness often referred to as 'ageing more rapidly'. There are also issues which are particular to their situation. Detention, for example, creates acute mental health problems and a total sense of powerlessness over their situation. This is supported by the study conducted by Puthooppambal et al. (2015), who argue that migrants lack of control over their own lives in detention centres is key to understanding the detrimental effect of detention on migrants' health.

Deportability in this study is broadly understood as constructing not only positions in the labour market (De Genova 2002) but, following Sager (2011: 162), also 'positions in family life, in the streets and in relation to subjective experiences of the body, the self and the future'. Deportability, and the accompanying fear it provokes, has a profound effect on an individual's life; it 'organises a range of aspects relating to everyday life in clandestinity' (Sager 2011: 162), and it has an effect on emotional wellbeing by creating a constant feeling of vulnerability and surveillance.

### *Fear of being sent back home*

The fear of being sent to their official country of origin (which, for migrants who have lived in other countries does not necessarily denote their 'home') emerged from most of the interviews as an all-consuming fear. Many participants emphatically explained that their life was in danger, or that they would be detained, if they were sent back to their country of origin. This fear conditioned their lives and the choices they made. It serves to explain some of the more drastic choices: such as the decision to go into hiding and live underground, an experience which is particularly difficult in Sweden. Fear is a feeling that is difficult to conceptualise, rationalise or understand. Most found it severely debilitating. The fear of return can be difficult to understand or to convey to another person. For most of the migrants, the countries they were at risk of being sent to were in conflict or post-conflict situations. There is an uncanny certainty in their

fear, which is very difficult to dismiss. Notice the similarities in the following three quotes, as well as the fear and the conviction in the migrants' articulations.

If they find my husband they would kill him, and me; after that they would cut off my head, cut off the heads of my children (Bahara, Afghanistan, 27, female).

If I go to Afghanistan, I have to do something for myself. If I stay at home someone will kill me because I have problems there. At that time I have to chose one of two ways, either wait for the guy to kill me or else I should take a gun to start fighting, I have to join a warlord (Kader, Afghanistan, 21, male).

In Kuwait, of course they are going to put me in jail because I am against Kuwait and because I am stateless (Mohammad, Kuwait, 28, male).

This fear also translates into fear of the Swedish authorities who have the responsibility to return them. Particularly those who are living underground speak of a fear of the Police. This is derived from the fact that although the Migration Agency retains responsibility for the implementation of the return decision, the apprehension is delegated the Police. Those who are in hiding have greater reason to be scared because the Police are actively searching for irregular migrants without a permit to stay. Rashid explains how this fear restrained his movements:

I was afraid that if I go out the Police will come and find me, arrest me. The problem is that I couldn't even go outside so I was confined to my home (Rashid, Afghanistan, 20, male).

During Autumn 2014, the Swedish Police took part in a European project called Operation Mos Maiorum. The aim of this two-week project was to detect, detain and possibly deport, irregular migrants in the 25 participating EU countries. Bahara relates how this increased their fear and restricted their movements to their apartment:

You know for two weeks the police searched [referring to Mos Maiorum]. We don't go outside, and we don't have any food during those two weeks because we cannot buy it. It was a high risk to go outside. We were just eating things we had at home (Bahara, Afghanistan, 27, female).

Paranoia is not limited to the authorities; migrants are scared that other people could turn them in. This fear not only limits their movements, but critically it also limits their access to different services. For example, with the enactment in 2008 of the Health and Medical Care for Asylum Seekers and Others Act, irregular migrants (without a *personnummer*) have access to emergency care and 'care that cannot be deferred'. However, when Mahdi (Afghanistan, 20, male) fell ill at school, where he had not told anyone about his new status, he was reluctant to visit the hospital. Miranda uneasily attends open daycare (*öppen förskola*), but is paranoid when she hears people speaking Swedish around her:

Since I don't speak Swedish, quite often I feel afraid that someone is going to call the Police and say that it is someone here who doesn't speak Swedish (Miranda, Albania, 23, female).

Only a handful of informants did not mention their fear of either being returned back or of the Swedish authorities. Salah is one of the exceptions. He had been living a rather ordinary life until he was apprehended and detained. Salah said that he had been working, had an apartment and claimed that he was not afraid of the authorities:

I was never, never afraid. I told them whatever you need, I'm here. I have given them the address, I live here [street name]. I have told them 'welcome, no problem, no problem' (Salah, Algeria, mid-30s, male).

This scenario is not improbable. Indeed, there are people, the so-called ‘undeportable deportables’, who do not enjoy a right to stay in Sweden and have been given a decision to return, but the authorities for some reason or another are unable to deport them (Leerkes and Broeders 2010: 831). This inability to deport, when known by the migrant, appeases their fear.

*‘I am below zero’: powerlessness and lack of control over their future*

Migrants decry the lack of control over their lives and their future. This is a classic ‘in limbo’ situation, characterised by powerlessness, dependency, and de-personalisation (cf. Vathi and King 2013). It is also brought about by what Sager (2011) correctly describes as a spiral of decreasing social rights, meant as a series of coercive measures to encourage migrants to leave the country voluntarily. Yousef puts it very powerfully across: ‘I am minus zero. Zero has meaning, I am below zero’ (Yousef, Kuwait, 39, male). Migrants, as Emmanuel (Nigeria, 30, male) put it, are ‘just waiting for what they’re going to say next’. It is a humiliating situation; the future for many is a black hole. They have no idea what it holds for them, they are unable to take any decisions and, overall, there is a foreboding sense that the future is ‘very dark’. This is a big source of stress for many. Mahdi is tired and explains it thus:

Before I thought a lot about my future, what I wanted to become and things like that.

But now when I lost my hope, I don’t think so much, I don’t have the energy right now... (Mahdi, Afghanistan, 20, male).

Ana expresses indignation on her lack of decision-making power in similar terms. Unlike most of the others, she points out the irony and unfairness of her future being in the hands of people who do not know her, that is, the Migration Agency officers.

I think it is the person who is making the decision, the one woman and one man, I have the names here (...) these two persons have my life in their hands. These two persons

make the decision, am I okay or not? Two persons that I have not met. I don't know who they are; they have never seen my face... All my life somebody else has told me how to live. Somebody who doesn't know me, somebody who has never seen me, who has never eaten with me, talked with me, drank with me. They are making decisions on how I should live (Ana, Serbia, around 40, female).

Particularly interesting is the parallel that Ana draws to the oppression she experienced in the past: 'all my life somebody else has told me how to live', and the parallels she draws with the Swedish migrant authorities. Indeed, the migrants' expressions of feelings and emotions are rarely neatly categorised geographically or temporally. When speaking about experiences migrants connect and draw parallels with other, even if totally unrelated, experiences they have had in the past, testifying to the complexity of the upheaval they experience as a result of their status in Sweden.

### *Dependency on 'the system' and participation in the community*

The increasing dependency on the Swedish asylum and deportation system is frustrating and disempowering for migrants. It eats away at their sense of self-worth. Vlad's quote below includes a mention of the metaphor of the 'animal' as the non-human – this resonates strongly with other studies (DeBono 2013) of migrants who are either in detention, or who do not have control over the decisions being taken on their own life.

I want to get the opportunity to take care of myself. I am not an animal, I am also a person. (...) But I don't need the help that they give me. Give me a chance to work and I'll take care of myself (Vlad, Russia, 21, male).

For migrants at risk of deportation who are living in the community, the lack of activities brought about by their situation, as well as the accompanying stress, cements the feeling that

they are wasting their lives. Typically, Salim says: ‘all we do is eat and sleep’ (Salim, stateless Palestinian, early 40s, male); Yousef says his life has ‘no meaning’ and Omar (stateless Palestinian, around 30, male) says that the lack of meaningful activity makes him ‘feel like an animal’. These kinds of comments belie a deeper sense of sadness and lethargy. They are an indication of the profound loss of wellbeing, and the lack of initiative or possible opportunities of getting out of the situation.

Many have taken considerable risks and they feel there is no return on their investment. Most are young, healthy individuals. Planning for the future is an important part of their lives. They describe how, if they will be forced to leave Sweden one day, they will be leaving without any new skills. In three years, Teka (Ethiopia, 27, male) says, he did not even get to learn and use the Swedish language. Finally, there is a sense of weariness and fatigue often expressed as a feeling of ‘becoming old’, or feeling ‘older than one’s years’ brought about by their experience in Sweden: ‘When I came here I was fresh like a 14-year-old boy and now my hair has become white’ (Wali, Afghanistan, 27, male).

### *Housing provided by the Migration Agency and its implications*

The Swedish Migration Agency provides accommodation for asylum-seekers, including migrants at risk of deportation. In 2014, two-thirds of the persons received by the Migration Agency were living in Migration Agency housing; the rest were living in their own housing, often with family and friends.<sup>4</sup> Some of them still had their cases being processed by the Migration Agency, others had had their cases transferred to the Police. The Migration Agency prefers to rent its own apartments to asylum-seekers but when that is not possible they

---

<sup>4</sup> Data from Swedish Migration Agency, *Arsredovisning 2014* (Annual Budget Report). Norrköping: Migration, 2015.  
<http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.39a9cd9514a346077212ead/1424702424160/%C3%85rsredovisning+2014.pdf>, accessed 25 September 2015

temporarily use privately-owned apartments. The Migration Agency is unable to plan the location of these housing units due to rules of public procurement. The outcome is that this housing is spread across the country with some being located far away from a Migration Agency office.

Contact with other residents at the Migration Agency centres is often limited. This is due to many factors, amongst which the brevity of some of the residents' stays, the lack of a common language and the distrust that characterises people in these situations. Wali describes how newly arrived migrants avoid him because they do not want to listen to the difficulties he has faced: 'they do not want to hear about problems (...) that is why they do not want contact' (Wali, Afghanistan, 27, male).

It is not only the location of the centres that is isolating, it is also the migrants' strained financial situation. All asylum-seekers, including returnees and forced returnees, have social rights. These state benefits change – and generally decrease – according to the various statuses the migrants hold. Their isolation does not help to appease the migrants' wellbeing, in particular the ones who are at risk of deportation. Wali, who at the time of the interview lived in a transit centre outside of a small town, describes:

We do not have any money for the bus to go outside of here, we are far away from any bigger cities. When you go there it is about 150 kronor for one family, just for one-way. We cannot go outside of this small place... When you are in a small town like this you do not have any contact with another person and that will be boring for you (Wali, Afghanistan, 27, male).

### *Living in the shadows: hiding and impermanence*

Unlike those who live in housing provided by the Migration Agency, those in hiding are trying to conceal their whereabouts from the authorities. The interviewees in this situation are living in different types of housing, but common to all of them is that they have contacts in Sweden who are assisting them. A common source of stress for those in hiding is their housing situation, which is often temporary. The migrants who are hiding describe how they are always looking for housing, and at certain points they have been forced to sleep outside in parks, or in train stations. In addition to the pressure of finding housing, persons living in hiding are often very worried about being detected by Police or other authorities.

Migrants who do not have good contacts often have a hard time remaining in hiding even if they would like to. Swedish organisations and personal networks are a source of assistance, information and resources, without which it is almost impossible for a person to live underground. Ana, for example, had been in Sweden for a very short time. Her case was fast-tracked, and although she had the right to appeal, she claimed that her flight was booked before the 2–3 weeks within which she could appeal. She had no contacts with any Swedish organisations or persons outside of the Migration Agency and therefore did not have the means to move into hiding or protest her decision.

Irregular migrants have a right to social welfare benefits; however, access varies across municipalities. In some municipalities, to avoid disclosing their own address, migrants have provided the address of the organisation helping them when applying for social welfare. Some do not pick up their social welfare benefit and rely solely on the financial support of their networks. Others manage to access their social welfare but need the financial support of their networks to make ends meet. Storai (Afghanistan, 23, female), who has children, categorically states: ‘if the organisation wasn’t here, we would be hungry by the end of the month’.

Parents who are not in hiding tend to present the situation for their children in Sweden as one which is overall an improvement compared to their country of origin; but parents who are in hiding are worried about the effects of their current situation on their children's development, wellbeing and opportunities. Intergenerational transmission in migrant families is permeated by stress in the case of families who are deportable. For example, Aamir believes his children's speech development has been delayed:

My children are three years old and they cannot speak. I don't think this situation is good for the children. My stress and tension is not good for my sons. We are both stressed and tense all the time. We can't play with the children now; my babies are feeling that we are not happy (Aamir, Afghanistan, 30, male).

Of high concern is the unintentional projection of parents' fears onto their children. Aamir and Bahara describe how their children, just like them, are scared of the Police:

*Aamir:* We talk about the police, that we don't want the police to see us; we don't want to go with the police. We often talk about the police and my children are scared of the police.

*Bahara:* For example last night our son woke up in the middle of the night, at 3 o'clock, and cried. We asked him why; he just said 'police, police, police'.

*Aamir:* I think he was dreaming about the police coming (Aamir and Bahara, Afghanistan, 30 male and 27 female).

Parents lament not having access to child daycare services where their children could interact with other children and adults. They feel that this has a negative impact on their children's development and wellbeing. Access to daycare services for children whose families are at risk of deportation differs between different municipalities. Ismat describes how being able to attend daycare has improved his daughter's situation:

My daughter had psychological problems... All the time she was asking about the house that we had before that was very big...She asked me for that house. 'Why don't we go back there to our home?' But when she has been to the '*dagis*' [daycare], she is feeling better (Ismat, Afghanistan, 29, male).

More shockingly, and echoing a recurring theme, some parents explain how, in spite of the poor conditions they have in Sweden, the situation for their children is still an improvement to what they faced in their country of origin. A good example of this is Arjana (Albania, 35, female) and her family who were living in hiding in Albania due to a blood feud. Her children were not able to go outdoors in Albania. In Sweden they are staying at the Migration Agency's transit centre and their activities are much less restricted. Arjana says: 'The children can go outside and run, play ball and such things... They like it here'. Bahara relates a similar experience: 'My children have friends here...They're going to swimming. We don't have stress from attacks. It's relaxed' (Bahara, Afghanistan, 27, female).

In spite of the challenges brought about by hiding and the fear of going outside, most migrants explained why it was still worth staying in this miserable situation rather than being deported. Even so, a few change their minds and decide to go back. Emmanuel lived underground in Sweden for three years. He got so weary and stressed out by the situation that he wrote to the Police in a desperate attempt to legalise his situation. The Police did not respond to his request. He was subsequently detained after being caught with an invalid bus card. He describes how he did not try to run away when the bus company called the Police since he was so sick of his situation, which, he claimed, was no improvement from the situation he had experienced in his country of origin. Emmanuel speaks of his weariness and despair:

I ran from the time that they wanted to deport me in 2011 until now. I was out there, living a life that is kind of no hope, no future, nothing (Emmanuel, Nigeria, 30, male).

### *Detention and wellbeing: waiting for the inevitable*

Detention is by far the most restrictive situation and produces extreme life conditions for people at risk of deportation. Detention has an obvious highly negative impact on the migrants' wellbeing. This is documented in many studies in Sweden (Puthooppambal et al. 2015) and in other countries (JRS-Europe 2010; Robjant et al. 2009). Migrants' fears of being returned back to their country of origin are sky-high at this point: they present high levels of stress, anger at being locked in, and evident signs of apathy and resignation. Vlad puts it thus:

You feel like an animal. You cannot decide anything for yourself, you can only listen to what they tell you to do and then do it. It's like you are... you know a slave (Vlad, Russia, 21, male).

The Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for the migrant detention centres. The centres are run by civil staff and are not run as high-security units. There is a steady routine inside detention, primarily set by meal times. Migrants can take part in several, albeit limited, activities. Detention centres differ on access to the courtyard outdoors, but on the whole they share basic facilities such as internet access, access to a games room, they are allowed to keep their mobile phones (without a camera), and they all receive daily pocket money. This money is used to buy products from the vending machines, to charge their phone or to pay relatives or friends to purchase products from outside. Migrants can receive visitors during visiting hours.

International independent observers have highlighted the overall good conditions inside migrant detention centres in Sweden. The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture highlighted that material conditions, space, food and staff were of a high standard in the two detention centres they visited (Council of Europe 2009: 41-45). These comments are confirmed by the migrants, some of whom were in a position to compare these migrant detention centres either with other forms of confinement in Sweden such as prison and

police arrest, or with other prisons and migrant detention centres in other countries (within and outside Europe). The same report, however, criticised the authorities over additional safeguards for people detained under the Aliens Act such as access to lawyers, possibility of informing a relative or a friend, and others. More pertinently, the report criticised healthcare: psychiatric and psychological support was lacking, and ‘access to health-care staff was controlled by custodial staff who questioned inmates about the reasons why they wished to see a doctor/nurse’ (Council of Europe 2009: 44).

Just like other deportees, impermanence and a sense of continuous movement is what characterises the detained deportees’ everyday life. Contact between detainees is often superficial, and support is derived mainly from friends and organisations. This is partly due to the negative effects of arbitrary detention, but can also be explained by the generally short duration of stay in detention, which in 2014 was an average of seven days (Swedish Migration Agency 2015). Vlad’s description of the coping strategies and interactions between the detainees gives the sense that this solidarity stems more out of need than out of choice:

We have fun sometimes together. And sometimes everybody has problems. Everybody there has their problems, they think a lot. But sometimes we play on the Internet so that the thoughts do not eat us up (Vlad, Russia, 21, male).

Migrants complain of lack of sleep, of the torturous waiting for the inevitable to happen. It is common that this combination of detention, stress and uncertainty disrupts their natural diurnal rhythm. At night when it goes quiet inside the detention centre, detainees’ anxiety rises and disrupts their sleep; conversely detainees find it easier to relax and sleep during the day when there are activities and sounds. The next two quotes communicate this:

You cannot sleep here, it is not possible to sleep here. Maybe because of stress? I cannot describe it. Maybe we have too much energy because you're always inside, no activity. (Vlad, Russia, 21, male)

I'm not sleeping so much. (...) I wait for the day they'll take me. I'm just waiting for that now because I know they didn't understand (me) so I wait for that. (...) I don't know the day. (Teka, Ethiopia, 27, male)

These echo findings of a JRS-Europe study with 685 detainees in 23 EU member-states. Detention, they found, significantly harms the health of migrant detainees both physically and mentally (JRS-Europe 2010). The diminished health is attributed to the cramped living conditions and the psychological stress produced by detention and confinement. This contributes to increasing feelings of anger, which compounds the situation. Another conclusion from this study was a clear indication that the health of migrant detainees progressively worsens with the period of time spent in detention (JRS-Europe 2010: 13).

#### *The physical and mental health of migrants at risk of deportation*

During the interviews, some migrants were close to tears. Their anger and distress were evident, alongside symptoms of extreme hopelessness. All these symptoms are generally associated with depressive episodes or traumatic incidents. In a study on people seeking asylum in Sweden, Brekke (2004) argues that these symptoms are only partly brought about by the waiting time. He observes a tension between the wishes of the asylum-seeker to obtain a residence permit and the authorities' confusing duality of both encouraging integration (in case the migrant is granted asylum) and remaining open to return and deportation (in the case of an unsuccessful outcome). In our case, the conflicting tension between the wishes of the asylum-seeker and the diametrically opposed decision of the state to remove the migrant from Swedish territory is

clear, and serves to augment the symptoms brought about by waiting. These augmented effects are discernible in the migrants' articulations of their mental and physical health.

Many migrants refer directly to physical and mental problems brought about by the high level of stress and constant worry. Common symptoms are intense anxiety, fatigue and depression. Yousef (Kuwait, 39, male) has a plausible explanation: 'I'm sleeping poorly because of my brain is working constantly'. Wali, on being informed by the Police that the deportation of him and his family is imminent, was totally overwhelmed:

The police told us, we will send you on Tuesday to Afghanistan. We do not have appetite for eating anything, I have not slept for three nights (Wali, Afghanistan, 27, male).

Fatma, a young Kuwaiti migrant, feels that all her thinking and worrying has made her both physically and mentally ill. Mohammad also describes how his health deteriorated since he was denied asylum; he has visited the doctor multiple times for different conditions:

When I came here I have gone to the doctor maybe like 100 times. I get sick every time because they [the Migration Agency] give me negative, negative (Mohammad, Kuwait, 28, male).

Aamir also has concerns regarding his physical health:

I have a big 'push' over my heart, lots of stress. And I think about what if my heart stops, what will happen to my future, my daughter's future? I talk to my wife about my death because I have too much stress. I'm a human, I'm not a machine; I'm human, same as you. Six years of stress will come to me... I have lived for six years with high stress. Two years here. I'm human, I cannot... [live with all this stress] (Aamir, Afghanistan, 30, male).

Many of the interviewees, themselves, diagnose their mental health problems as rooted in depression. Some of them have thoughts of, or even attempt, suicide. This is not uncommon in migrant detention centres, as Robjant et al. (2009) show in their analysis of different research projects spanning the US, Australia and the UK, which all look into the effects of detention on migrants. Kader portrays the complete desperation he felt after he received his third negative decision. He also ended up homeless when he absconded and left the Migration Agency's housing to avoid being caught. He felt completely lost and overwhelmed, as though there was no way out of his misery. Sweden did not allow him stay, going back to Afghanistan was too dangerous of an option, and the Dublin regulation made it impossible for him to apply for asylum in other European countries. Kader recalls this desperation:

The only solution you have is to finish yourself. Yeah I tried lots of times to kill myself but fortunately I failed (Kader, Afghanistan, 21, male).

Migrants mentioned coping strategies but rarely elaborated on them. Our participants might have the tendency to overstress the negative aspects in interviews, as a clear indication of the precarity of their situation. However, it is also clear that the migrants felt the need to speak out about their ordeal, indicating that they did not have many avenues for externalising this. Coping strategies included relying on the support of their community, friends, activist groups and networks; but it is also common in such situations to avoid speaking about the issue. In some cases this was they are surrounded by people who have their own serious problems to grapple with; in other cases, their fear of being apprehended by the police made them generally distrustful. However 'strong' and 'determined' they presented themselves, migrants at risk of deportation appeared to have little space and time to invest in coping strategies, and to take care of themselves.

## Conclusions

The metaphorical expression ‘burning without fire’ is a powerfully evocative rendering of the experience of forced removal for deportees and migrants at risk of deportation in Sweden. This chapter has shown how deportable migrants in Sweden are enduring hardships which, in their different ways, they experience as ‘burning’ – as extreme, painful, agonising – in spite of the relatively good structures in place, or rather the well-regulated, sophisticated bureaucratic structures in place. It conveys the paradoxical situation of, on the one hand, having an immigration, asylum and returns system which has deservedly in some areas (less in others) gained a reputation for being a good and fair system. On the other hand, there is the momentous impact of the return decision on the migrant, and the ensuing hardships once they become migrants at risk of deportation, and eventually a deportee. The hardships, in Graeberian terms, could be explained as a necessary feature of modern bureaucracies which operate through the constant threat of violence and harm in the case of transgression or resistance. Migrant narratives of their deteriorating mental health show the embodiment and consequence of this violence.

‘Burning without fire’ is also an adequate allegory for another key tension that can be found in migrants’ narratives: this is the trade-off that migrants make, preferring to remain in the miserable situation of deportables in Sweden rather than being sent back to their country of origin. This chapter has shown that migrants’ psychosocial wellbeing is severely compromised, to different degrees depending on the different situations that a deportable migrant can be in. The trade-off that many of these people are consciously making, by choosing to remain as irregular deportables in Sweden and not returning back, involves putting their own health at risk. This chilling realisation serves as an indicator of the gravity that a possible return constitutes for the migrants. As can be seen from Bahara’s sombre and resolute quote, she ‘accepts’ living with the problems in Sweden rather than going back. And Rashid, Miranda and

others live in misery and fear of the Swedish Police, rather than going back. Therefore the ‘burning without fire’ metaphor also denotes, for lack of a better word, the paradoxical ‘choice’ that the migrants deliberately make. A choice that they are forced into by their personal and structural circumstances. A choice that no one should have to make. This is a ‘forced choice’ that brings to the fore the sheer absurdity of trying to discuss a deportee’s psychosocial wellbeing and health. A forced choice that does not remove the state’s responsibility to minimise the harm done. A choice that forces people to live in such dire situations puts an obligation on all political actors – state, non-state, global and local – to discuss this situation and search for alternatives.

## References

- Brekke, J. (2004) *While We Are Waiting: Uncertainty and Empowerment among Asylum-Seekers in Sweden*. Oslo: Institute for Social Research.
- Caplan, S. E. (2002) Problematic Internet use and psychosocial well-being: development of a theory-based cognitive-behavioral measurement instrument, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 18(5): 553–575.
- Correa-Velez, I., Gifford, S. M. and Barnett, A. G. (2010) Longing to belong: social inclusion and wellbeing among youth with refugee backgrounds in the first three years in Melbourne, Australia, *Social Science and Medicine*, 71(8): 1399–1408.
- Council of Europe (2009) *Report to the Swedish Government on the visit to Sweden carried out by the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 9 to 18 June 2009*, CPT/Inf (2009) 34. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2007), *Memorandum to the Swedish Government: Assessment of the Progress made in Implementing the 2004 Recommendations of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights*, CommDH(2007)10, Strasbourg, 16 May 2007.

DeBono, D. (2013) 'Less than human': the detention of irregular immigrants in Malta', *Race and Class*, 55(2): 60-81.

DeBono, D., Ronnqvist, S. and Magnusson, K. (2015) *Humane and Dignified? Migrants' Experiences of Living in a 'State of Deportability' in Sweden*. Malmö: Malmö University, Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare.

De Genova, N. (2002) Migrant 'illegality' and deportability in everyday life, *Annual Review Anthropology*, 31: 419–47.

Egan, M., Tannahill, C., Petticrew, M. and Sian T. (2008) Psychosocial risk factors in home and community settings and their associations with population health and health inequalities: a systematic meta-review, *BMC Public Health*, 8(1): 239.

Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. (2013) The rise of the private border guard: accountability and responsibility in the migration control industry. In Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. and Nyberg Sørensen, N. (eds) *The Migration Industry and the Commercialization of International Migration*, London: Routledge, 128-151.

- Graeber, D. (2006) Dead zones of the imagination: on violence, bureaucracy, and interpretive labor: The 2006 Malinowski Memoria Lecture, *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2(2): 105-128.
- Graeber, D. (2015) *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, Brooklyn NY: Melville House.
- Grimheden, J. (2006) The self-reflective human rights promoter, in Grimheden J. and Ring, R. (eds.) *Human Rights Law: From Dissemination to Application: Essays in Honour of Göran Melander*, The Hague: Brill,
- Grove, N. J., Zwi, A. B., Silove, D. and Tarantola D. (2006) Psychosocial health and human rights: fair weather friends? Examining post-tsunami interventions in conflict-affected areas, *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 11(2): 71–94.
- IOM (2013) *World Migration Report 2013: Migrant Well-Being and Development*, Geneva: IOM.
- JRS-Europe (2010) *Becoming Vulnerable in Detention: Civil Society Report on the Detention of Vulnerable Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants in the European Union (The DEVAS Project)*, Belgium: Jesuit Refugee Service.
- Khosravi, S. (2009) Sweden: detention and deportation of asylum seekers, *Race and Class*, 50: 38–56.
- Kohli, R. and Mather, R. (2003) Promoting psychosocial well-being in unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in the United Kingdom, *Child and Family Social Work*, 8(3): 201–212.

- Leerkes, A. and Broeders, D. (2010) A case of mixed motives? Formal and informal functions of administrative immigration detention, *British Journal of Criminology*, 50(5): 830–850.
- Martikainen, P., Bartley, M. and Lahelma, E. (2002) Psychosocial determinants of health in social epidemiology, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 31(6): 1091–1093.
- MIPEX (2014) *Migrant Integration Policy Index 2015: Sweden*. HTTP: <http://www.mipex.eu/sweden>, accessed 25 September 2015
- Puthooppambal, S., Ahlberg, B.M. and Bjerneld, M. (2015) A prison with extra flavours: experiences of immigrants in Swedish immigration detention centres, *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 11(2): 73-85.
- Robjant, K., Hassan, R. and Kataona, C. (2009) Mental health implications of detaining asylum seekers: systematic review, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 194(4): 306-312.
- Sager, M. (2011) *Everyday Clandestinity: Experiences on the Margins of Citizenship and Migration Policies*, Lund: Lund Universitet.
- Swedish Migration Agency (2015) The Mission of the Migration Agency [online]. Last updated 8 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.migrationsverket.se/English/About-the-Migration-Agency/Our-mission.html>, accessed on 18 September 2015.

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (2014), Statement submitted by the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues and co-sponsored by the International Association of Applied Psychology, the International Council of Psychologists, the World Council for Psychotherapy, the American Psychological Association and other accredited members of the Psychology Coalition at the UN Statement in support of the Assessment of the Status of Implementation of the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, New York: UN, 7–11 April 2014.

Vathi, Z. and King, R. (2013). 'Have you got the *British?*' Narratives of migration and settlement of Albanian-origin immigrants in London, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36 (11): 1829–1848.

WHO (2010) *Mental Health and Development*, Geneva: WHO.

---